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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KAMPALA 001024

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [PINR](#) [UG](#)
SUBJECT: UGANDA: AN OPPOSITION CANDIDATE'S RETURN FROM EXILE

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Aaron Sampson for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Ending 23 years in exile, opposition figure Olara Otunnu recently completed a two-week tour of Uganda to drum up support for a potential presidential bid. Otunnu is angling to take over the Uganda People's Congress (UPC) party from relatives of UPC founder and former Ugandan President Milton Obote in order to secure a place on Uganda's 2011 presidential ballot. An American filmmaker traveling with Otunnu's entourage described an enthusiastic and charismatic Otunnu capable of drawing large crowds in his home base of northern Uganda and winning over smaller, generally more skeptical audiences in President Museveni's stronghold of southwestern Uganda. Once safely ensconced within the UPC, Otunnu is hoping to secure the presidential endorsement of a coalition of opposition parties, thereby enabling him to run as President Museveni's sole opposition challenger. The likelihood of a two-way Museveni-Otunnu match-up, however, is slim and if he does make his way onto the ballot, Otunnu may end up peeling votes away from the more serious opposition contender, Kizza Besigye. Otunnu's biggest hurdle, however, may be simply reconnecting with potential supporters after more than two decades abroad. End Summary.

Long Time Gone

12. (C) Olara Otunnu returned to Uganda for the first time in 23 years on August 22 to lay the framework for a potential presidential bid. Otunnu went into exile in January 1986 while serving as General Tito Okello's Foreign Minister. The former Foreign Minister and UN Under-Secretary General is seeking the presidential nomination of the Uganda People's Congress (UPC) party in hopes of being selected as an eventual compromise opposition candidate. Otunnu arrived in Kampala from Kenya traveling with nothing more than a Ugandan passport application form. Otunnu claims to have submitted 15 separate applications for a Ugandan passport since going into exile. An American filmmaker who traveled with Otunnu from Nairobi and is endeavoring to produce a behind-the-scenes documentary of the Ugandan presidential race said Otunnu had obtained passports from various African governments while serving as a UN diplomat, and used these to reach Kenya. Otunnu is widely believed to have an Ivoirian passport. Uganda processed Otunnu's most recent application and issued him a new passport on September 7, one day before his departure from Uganda to return to New York via Turkey.

Not Ready to Make Nice

13. (U) Upon arrival Otunnu almost immediately provoked the ire of the Ugandan military by reviving allegations of genocide perpetrated by Ugandan soldiers in the north during

the brutal insurgency led by the Lord's Resistance in the 1990s. This precipitated claims by the unmarried Otunnu that Ugandan military intelligence was cooking up a smear campaign over his sexual orientation and HIV status. In a written response to Otunnu's genocide allegations and warnings of an impending state-sponsored smear campaign, Ugandan military spokesman Lt. Col. Felix Kulayigye labeled Otunnu as a "reckless political agitator" and sedition spreader who "must be isolated."

14. (C) As with other opposition meetings, police have required Otunnu's entourage to provide advance notice of any political gathering involving 20 persons or more. Otunnu's biggest crowd was approximately 10,000 people in the northern city of Lira. The American filmmaker traveling with Otunnu said evidence of any government harassment or intimidation was limited to the presence of plain-clothes police "minders" at Otunnu events and occasional acts of petty sabotage such as waylaying or disabling PA systems required for Otunnu to address the crowds. The filmmaker observed that Uganda was proving to be one of the easier places in the region for a foreign journalist with a rolling video camera to operate. In the Museveni stronghold of southwestern Uganda, police prohibited Otunnu's delegation from holding processions through towns and Otunnu himself ordered the removal of UPC flags from his vehicles. Events in the southwest were also smaller, although Otunnu allegedly won over a number of university students in Mbarara, who appeared to have been armed in advance with National Resistance Movement (NRM) talking points, with his platform focusing on youth, women, and reconciliation.

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15. (C) Otunnu and his staff were reportedly surprised by the negative slant of Ugandan press coverage of his return. The American filmmaker reported that many of the local journalists covering Otunnu events appeared to have their stories written well in advance and said he filmed journalists apologizing to Otunnu for infusing their written dispatches and televised reports with pro-government rhetoric.

Comment: The Long Way Around

16. (C) Otunnu's path to an eventual presidential nomination is not an easy one. In addition to reconnecting with his countrymen and women after more than two decades abroad, Otunnu faces challenges from within the UPC from Miria Obote, the widow of Milton Obote, and her son, Jimmy Akena, who is considering a run for the presidency himself. To prevail as the sole opposition candidate endorsed by the Inter-Party Cooperation (IPC) coalition, Otunnu must also prevail over the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) leader Kizza Besigye, who remains the clear opposition front runner based on his showings during the 2001 and 2006 presidential elections and the FDC's overall support base.

17. (C) For the moment President Museveni's re-election team seems to regard Otunnu as little more than a political side-show that could actually end up peeling away northern votes not from Museveni but from Besigye, whom they fear more. On September 8, Presidential Advisor Moses Byaruhanga said Museveni's election advisors are banking on three opposition candidates - Besigye, Otunnu, and Democratic Party vice president Norbert Mao, another northerner who recently announced his intention to stand as an independent. This scenario would reinforce government characterizations of a disorganized opposition and likely benefit Museveni. Revealing likely lines of attack once the presidential campaign begins in earnest, Byaruhanga described Otunnu as a small-time political opportunist who abandoned fellow northerners when things in the north were at their worst. Byaruhanga also indicated that questions of Otunnu's citizenship would likely resurface should Otunnu ever emerge

as a serious threat to Museveni's re-election campaign.
Otunnu's professional and family ties to the unpopular Tito
Okello regime of the 1980s may also hamper his presidential
aspirations.

HOOVER